

## Against the Grain

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### ATG Interviews Sven Fund, Managing Director of Knowledge Unlatched

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## Managing Director of Knowledge Unlatched

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

**ATG:** *Sven, Knowledge Unlatched has been an innovator in the open access space since its founding. But for those who aren't familiar with Knowledge Unlatched, can you tell us what is unique about your approach?*

**SF:** Knowledge Unlatched (KU) has set out to create the missing link between the many initiatives and publishers that want to publish open access and the institutions that are willing to support it financially. Our mission is to make OA work and build a bridge between funders and publishers, and we see our role as a provider of pragmatic solutions. Today, KU works with more than 575 libraries and over 100 publishers — from very small to large — worldwide. With their help, we have made more than 1,450 books and 20 journals open access.

**ATG:** *Can you tell us a little more about the “nuts and bolts” of how Knowledge Unlatched creates this missing link? How does KU enable the necessary interaction between libraries and publishers to create these open access collections?*

**SF:** In our view, there is neither a lack of willingness by librarians to invest in Open Access, nor do publishers refrain from publishing more content OA. But in a fragmented marketplace, it is sometimes difficult for those players to match. KU helps by providing open platforms and introducing sustainable business models that both sides benefit from. Since 2013, KU has successfully managed six pledging rounds. That creates experience and trust, and we are happy to share this with the scholarly publishing community.

**ATG:** *We know that your model has evolved since Knowledge Unlatched first launched its Pilot Collection in 2013. Can you give us an update? How have your collection offerings grown? What would you say are the major additions?*

**SF:** Indeed, KU has grown quite a bit since **Frances Pinter** and many supporters launched it in 2013. By now, Knowledge Unlatched is a marketplace with more than 20 different offerings that we developed with our partners. Through KU, libraries can support OA for both books and journals in HSS as well as in STEM. In addition, we have developed **KU Open Funding**, which supports researchers in finding the right OA publication offer for their publication needs and **KU Open Analytics**, which measures and reports the impact of OA worldwide. So, we really focus on the transactional side and strive to create as much transparency to libraries as possible.

**ATG:** *You mentioned developing more than 20 different offerings with your partners. Can you tell us more about them? Which which would you say have gotten the most*



*positive response? And what exactly is KU Open Funding? How does it work?*

**SF:** Our OA offerings support either freeing up scholarly content (“unlatching” content) or supporting open infrastructures (i.e., hosting platforms). These include, for example, two impressive OA book programs by **IntechOpen**, a well-known STEM publisher — one focused on Engineering and one on Physics — but also **Routledge’s** complete frontlist in African Studies and Gender Studies. With **HAU Books**, we want to unlatch a prestigious book program in Anthropology, and our partner **transcript** has made its entire Political Science program Open Access with our help. The same holds true for a mixed package of HSS books in French, collected by a large number of French university presses under the umbrella of **OpenEdition**. And then there are German-language packages in IT Law and in Romance studies from leading publishers in those fields. Further, with **LatestThinking** and **Morressier**, we venture into Open Access for completely new categories — videos and academic posters.

On the infrastructure side, we have developed a package with our hosting partner since KU’s launch, **OAPEN**. We also hope to fund the Open Research Library, which introduces unique benefits for participating libraries.

With every product, we try to improve our business models and test new offerings, which is only possible if both publishers and libraries support us in these experiments. Open Access is still fluid, and all players need to experiment. **KU Open Funding** is one of these experiments. It is a marketplace bringing institutions, researchers and OA publishers together to give researchers the option to filter through a list of predefined publishing offers, which have been approved by his/her library or institution. We developed this platform because we saw a need for more transparency around Book Processing Charges (BPCs). By the way, there is the same need for Author Processing Charges (APC), but the segment is less fragmented and already

better developed. To see how **KU Open Funding** works and helps libraries organize their OA workflows, libraries may register for free.

**ATG:** *Supporting your numerous collections, Knowledge Unlatched offers various tools and services for stakeholders in the OA community. Can you tell us about those?*

**SF:** I see three generations of offerings in KU’s portfolio. There is, of course, **KU Select**, our flagship collection to which many publishers and libraries contribute on an annual basis. The second generation are what we call **KU Partner projects**, a development that started with **Language Science Press** and **Luminos**. When we were asked to promote OA collections that do not have their own library sales force, we happily agreed. Here, we see a lot of possibilities to develop relationships with small and very focused publishers such as, for example, **Language Science Press** to those able to provide broader offerings such as, for example, **Routledge** and **IntechOpen**.

Finally, we saw ourselves confronted with the demand for analytical and consolidation tools, particularly from librarians, who want to see the impact of their budgetary investments. In this context, we also began developing the third generation of KU offerings focused on the OA infrastructure itself, including the **Open Research Library**, which we launched in a beta version earlier this year.

**ATG:** *It sounds like you are offering some valuable services to other OA publishers through your KU Partner Projects. How did that project get started? Exactly what type services does KU provide to your partners? Is this the program that has enabled you to have the more than 20 different offerings you referenced earlier?*

**SF:** **KU Partners** grew out of KU’s signature product, which we call **KU Select**. Some publishers wanted to offer their full collections on a specific subject, not just a few titles. This path allows us to mold packages geared at specific libraries or a specific audience, whose needs and financial resources vary greatly. For KU, this is an important driver for growth and differentiation.

**ATG:** *When talking to prospective libraries and publishers about your collections and services, what advantages do you emphasize? In short, why should they participate?*

**SF:** Libraries, for good reasons, see open access as a better future for academic publishing — and most publishers agree with that view. It reduces the complexity of an intransparent, two-sided market into a straightforward relation that offers benefits for all participants if executed properly. First and foremost, OA

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creates free access to scholarly content that was in the past published behind paywalls. Researchers in smaller institutions and in countries less well off than the US, the UK and Germany, for example, benefit a great deal from open science, and **KU** engages actively with the Global South to make the content that has been opened known.

At the same time, we offer products that libraries can trust and need for their faculty. Our Title Selection Committee of over 180 librarians from all over the world works hard to secure quality standards and relevance to a wide range of institutions supporting research. Finally, many publishers we work with have come to view Open Access as a business model that works for them, too. It has always been important to us to create a sustainable system for scholarly publishing, so that publishers approach it with an evolutionary rather than a disruptive mindset.

**ATG:** *Please tell us more about the title selection committee. Besides the more than 180 librarians you just noted, are there any others involved i.e., faculty subject specialists, publishers, etc.? How do titles come to the attention of the committee? Can others outside the committee recommend titles for consideration?*

**SF:** The group is self-coordinated. Librarians can join by application, and they are admitted to the platform where title voting takes place. The same holds true for faculty subject specialists. The more experts from the library side join, the better. And since we use technology for the selection process, we don't have a bottleneck for having more people join.

Titles are proposed by publishers, but there are also mechanisms in which we ask libraries to determine publishers, programs and even individual titles they would like to see in one of our collections.

Publishers do not participate in the selection process, as they have a vested interest to promote their own titles.

**ATG:** *We noticed that in 2016, the legal structure for Knowledge Unlatched was changed from a British Community Interest Company (CIC) to a German GmbH. What is the difference in these legal structures? And how has it impacted the operation of the company?*

**SF:** That is correct. In 2016 **Frances Pinter** handed the company over to me, and I relocated the legal entity to Berlin, where I am based. In this process, I consulted with lawyers and tax advisors and discussed the best setup for a small, lean yet pretty international company. Their recommendation was to choose a GmbH (comparable to an LLC in the US) to avoid high administrative costs. When it comes to how **KU** works with libraries and publishers, the impact on our modus operandi has been zero. We have not changed the margin **KU** operates on since its launch, and there are no plans to do so.

**KU** is like a small independent bookstore. Our operating margins are very tight. There is a constant battle to cover our internal costs so we can keep offering our services and the benefits they provide. Minimizing the reporting burden that comes from being non-profit helps us keep our overheads low. I also take no compensation in my role as CEO as part of my personal commitment to make **KU** work.

**ATG:** *Sven, some fear that this change in status to a German GmbH has resulted in the over-commercialization of Knowledge Unlatched. Your response?*

**SF:** I wished this would not be a discussion about legal structures — which I am not an expert in and frankly am not interested in — but about impact. I feel that the legal status of a company and its ethics are not mutually inclusive — one can be quite inefficient and wasteful with resources as a non-profit. In 2018, **KU** has generated a profit of 46.600€ after taxes on a revenue line of two million euros. I know very few people who would enter significant financial risk with their own savings.

**ATG:** *While KU Research works closely with Knowledge Unlatched, you all operate independently. Can you explain the nature of the relationship? Are you currently working on any joint projects?*

**SF:** Correct, **KU Research** and **Knowledge Unlatched** are two different organizations. **KU Research** is run by **Cameron Neylon**, it is the CIC within which **KU** was founded. After I acquired **Knowledge Unlatched**, **Cameron** and his team focused solely on research projects — and the work they are doing is both groundbreaking and impressive. **Knowledge Unlatched GmbH** is the legal entity for the operations we discussed earlier.

**ATG:** *Recently, Knowledge Unlatched band together with several international partners to form the Open Research Library. Can you tell us about that initiative? Who are your partners and what do you hope to accomplish?*

**SF:** **Open Research Library (ORL)** aims to become a central hub for content funded through **KU**. When we discussed this with our technology partner **BiblioLabs**, we felt that it was a good idea to include other OA books as well, since the process would not involve any drastic changes technologically, but it would add significant value. After consultation with librarians and our publisher partners, we decided to take this step.

**ORL** will be as open as possible regarding metadata, content data and — if legally possible — usage data. Funding will work through a pledging mechanism, like for other **KU** partners, but using the platform and funding it are completely independent of each other. **ORL** is and will remain freely available to any researcher and library anywhere in the world, whether they decide to support it or not. The libraries that do decide to support its infrastructure will have added benefits, including, for example, their institution's micro-site within the platform.

In short, **ORL** tries to make use of what is out there already — technology from

**BiblioLabs**, discovery systems, metadata and content data supplied to us by different partners, and integration with networks like the **Researcher App** and **DPLA**. I find it hard to understand some of the criticism we have received for this project. Our conversations with libraries around the world indicate that they see a need for this. We all share a common goal: to make researchers' lives easier, and that's the vision for **ORL**. It is also important to add here that we will continue to work with other hosting platforms, independent of **ORL**, including, of course, **OAPEN**, **JSTOR** and **Project MUSE**.

**ATG:** *From what you've said and what we've read, it appears that the goal is for the ORL to create "a central hub" providing "one search and hosting interface" to provide access and discoverability to all types of OA content, not just KU collections. Are we on target? Or are we overstating things?*

**SF:** Well, this is at least what many libraries and researchers ask us to do. It is a big task that requires more parties involved than just **KU**, but I feel we are on the right track. In my mind, a higher degree of centralization is needed to fully deliver on the promises of Open Access. Interoperability and true openness of platforms and models are key — no exclusivities, no hidden hurdles. That is what we are trying to accomplish with **ORL**.

**ATG:** *Part of your plan for ORL is to expand its offerings with research videos and posters. Can you elaborate? Are any other formats under consideration for inclusion in the ORL?*

**SF:** The core motivation for us to launch **ORL** was the demand from libraries funding open access through **KU** to find all content in one place. With two brand new pledging offerings — posters by **Morressier** and research videos by **Latest Thinking** — we will incorporate two new non-book categories into **ORL**. In principle, any type of content used by researchers can be hosted.

**ATG:** *Are there any other new initiatives that you plan to "unlatch" in the coming months? We'd love a scoop.*

**SF:** We have been quite busy over the past two years, with **KU Open Analytics**, **KU Open Funding**, **ORL** and several new publisher collections, including, for example, **Routledge's** Gender Studies and African Studies and **IntechOpen's** Engineering and Physics collections. This diversity is often misunderstood as hyperactivity on our end, but I feel that doesn't describe it well. A lot is happening in Open Access, and we are trying to keep up with what researchers, libraries and publishers expect from us. We will see a number of new content offerings by publishers in 2020 as well as some renewals of collections launched in the past. It is really gratifying to see what libraries and publishers have built together — top content that seeks for continued OA funding and that is expanding in volume.

A concrete next step is our support for **Berghahn's** journal flip of 13 titles in Anthropology — a massive project under the **Libraria** initiative. We feel that more needs

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to be done for journals in HSS, and this model is really promising.

**ATG:** *From a broader perspective, what should we be looking for from OA publishing? How do you see it evolving in the next few years?*

**SF:** We need to focus more on the researcher! The OA space had to work out the internal relationship between those involved in the publication process, and a lot has been achieved. But now we need to shift the attention back to those we are doing this for: researchers in their daily work.

I am pleased to see that more and more libraries and publishers support open access in tangible ways, and my impression is that there is no decrease in their willingness to experiment. We expect this to be a stable pattern. One question mark for me is the likely impact of a cooling world economy on library budgets, particularly more innovative things like open access. I am confident that many libraries and publishers have made OA a core element of their mission and will therefore continue to expand their support. But librarians will have to make hard choices, and we need to support them with our work in the best possible way.

**ATG:** *It sounds like you think both OA and Knowledge Unlatched are sustainable in the long term. Aside from decreasing library budgets, do you see any other threats to either OA's or KU's viability? And you note that librarians will have to make hard choices. What hard choices do you mean? Will publishers have to make similar hard choices?*

**SF:** The hardest choice on the library side, it seems to me, is that librarians have to consider canceling the Big Deals. That is not necessarily something that is negative for them, but spending budgets in smaller increments requires much more knowhow and work. Going down this avenue means to devote more resources, and that is simply not possible in many institutions, if libraries lack the backing from above.

The vast majority of publishers seems willing to publish OA. They understand that it is important to many authors and almost all funders and customers. At a certain point, they will have to adapt their organizations to a changing landscape. There are still publishers today that invest in more institutional sales force. I doubt this is a good idea. But I am not worried about publishers. When it comes to digitizing their content and testing business models, they have proven they can adapt quickly.

**ATG:** *Sven, thanks so much. We really appreciate you agreeing to do this interview. We've learned a lot.* 🌿

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libraries globally, it isn't immune to the broad changes taking place that are having an impact on the ways that libraries and librarians function.

And I hope you won't mind if I plug the fact that we have annually offered a travel scholarship to the **Charleston Conference** for early career librarians in the humanities. So we work with and invest in libraries and librarians in a number of ways.

**ATG:** *One final question, we always wonder how busy executives get re-energized and ready for the next challenge. Are there any activities or hobbies that you turn to for relaxation and fun?*

**NN:** Well, er, um, reading. And walking and music, the gym, and my family. Holidays are good and whoever invented the weekend was a genius.

**ATG:** *Mr. Newton we are delighted that you were able to take time out of a very busy schedule to talk to us. Thank you so much!* 🌿